

**The Humiliation of Wisdom:
An Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 1:18–31**

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¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

²⁶ Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (NRSV)

At the cross, God gave the ultimate demonstration of reorienting the world, a revelation of the ways in which God’s priorities often did not align with the priorities of humanity. By yielding to the cross, Jesus Christ embodied a narrative that Israel’s prophets had proclaimed centuries before—that God’s ways were not the ways of humanity, and that God had chosen the path of weakness to shame the strength of the world.

In our society today, which is fractured along nearly any lines one might want to draw, we find ourselves questioning where our allegiance ought to lie. Many in the United States offer their allegiance to their country or political party; others offer it to their favorite public figures; others to their religious denominations or particular understandings of Scripture. Dividing ourselves into such fragmented groups allows us to create group identities and derive an inappropriate sense of social superiority among those self-selected groups. This problem is not a new one, though. When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth in the first century, he did so

because he had heard they were splintering themselves into these same kinds of doctrinal factions, and he recognized this as a sign that they had shifted their attention from the cross of Christ to the wisdom of the world. Perhaps Paul's rebuke of the Corinthians has relevance for readers today.

Paul knew that the city of Corinth, because it had a lot of new wealth and a broad social stratification, was inclined to divisiveness over philosophical differences, and he knew that the church there was embracing that same concept of social ordering. Rather than submitting themselves to the priorities of God, they were pridefully debating the merits of the teachings and rhetorical skills of various apostolic leaders, leading to a marginalization of some groups within the church. Paul challenged them to return to the cross, and to the humility such a journey requires, as a source of unity for the church as a body. This sacrificial single-mindedness was an echo of Jesus' teaching that in the kingdom of God the last would be first, a principle that looked like foolishness to the broader Corinthian culture. Yet this was the essential call of Christ, and it was wisdom to those who followed God.

Who are the Corinthians?

In ancient times, the city of Corinth was a wealthy hub of economic activity because of its important location along shipping trade routes between Asia Minor and Italy. In 146 BCE, the city was decimated by Roman forces and was not rebuilt until Julius Caesar established it as a Roman colony in 44 BCE.¹ Caesar resettled it with freed slaves and other ambitious members of lower classes, and the city quickly regained much of its former glory. By the time Paul visited

¹ Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters*, Second Edition, (Eerdmans, 2016), 274–275.

Corinth and founded the church there in around 51 CE, the rebuilt city was in its third generation of inhabitants. The city had developed a competitive socio-economic environment in which many denizens had worked their way up the ladder to an elite status—Corinth was one of the few places in the Roman Empire at this time where freed slaves could be elected to the highest positions of governance in the city.² Since the city and its inhabitants were so young, the social hierarchy was not deeply entrenched in their society, and that capacity for social mobility led to the rise of exclusive factions in the people and a zealous appetite for groups to individuate themselves.³

The demographic makeup of the city was diverse in nearly every respect. Although the city had become a center of new wealth, it had a large population of working class craftsmen who took advantage of Corinth's status as a Roman colony and as a high-traffic stop for traders.⁴ Ethnically, the city was primarily made up of Greeks, but there was also a significant-enough community of Jews in Corinth that the city had a synagogue (see Acts 18:8). The church in Corinth shared much of this same diversity. Most of them seem to have been Greek converts ("God-fearers," or Gentiles who held to the beliefs of Judaism without adhering to all the Law, particularly that of circumcision; see 5:17–20), but Paul also mentions several prominent Jews in his letters to the church. In addition, the church included members of every social class, from slaves to the most elite levels of society.⁵ Paul confirms the social diversity of the church in Corinth in verse 26: "not many of you were... powerful, not many of noble birth," which

² Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Kindle Edition. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), location 251.

³ David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, Ill. : Leicester, England: IVP Academic, 2004), 556–557.

⁴ deSilva, 556.

⁵ Erastus, who is described as Corinth's city treasurer in Rom 16:23, is likely the same Erastus who paid for the expensive construction of a public pavement for Corinth.

simultaneously indicates that the church was primarily made up of people of lower classes and that there were indeed some from upper classes.

Paul's Work in Corinth

Paul probably first visited Corinth in 50 or 51 CE⁶ and, according to Acts 18:11, spent around eighteen months with them before leaving for the next city in his journey. Even after he left Corinth, Paul seemed to have corresponded regularly with the church there through letters, as indicated in 5:9–10 and 7:1, and the epistle we call “1 Corinthians” was not truly Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth, nor was it his last. Paul cared deeply for this church, carrying a parental affection for this community he had founded (see 3:10, 4:14).

This letter seems to have been deliberately intended to address a growing conflict between different “parties” in the church—a problem reported to him from “Chloe’s people,” who are not otherwise identified. The formation of these parties followed the social individuation that was occurring in the city. In the same way that socio-economic factions were forming throughout the city to promote each group’s interests and further its upward mobility, similar parties were taking shape within the Corinthian church to establish a hierarchy of Christ followers. Groups were segmenting themselves based on which apostle they chose to follow: Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), or Christ.⁷ These groups were quarreling with one another, causing division and competition within the church, and Paul wrote this letter primarily as a corrective to this growing divide.

⁶ N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 211.

⁷ Paul’s description of a faction of those claiming to “belong to Christ” in this context is not an indication that these believers were the only ones holding true to the gospel of Christ. It suggests instead that this faction in particular arrogantly considered themselves morally superior to the others. In a sense, this group turned the name of Christ into a measure of status.

The epistle must be read through the lens of Paul’s appeal to unity in the church, a theme that is made emphatically clear in the theological and philosophical work of the first few chapters, and is worked out in practice in the latter parts of the letter.

Wisdom

In the middle of addressing church unity in the opening verses of 1 Corinthians, Paul made a sudden and unusual pivot in verse 18—the first verse of our segment—to discuss wisdom (Gk. *sophia*). In these opening chapters of the letter, he mentioned wisdom more than five times as often as the rest of his preserved writings combined,⁸ an indication that he uniquely identified the divisions in Corinth as being rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of what wisdom meant for followers of Christ—in placing their allegiances in their self-selected apostolic leaders, they were claiming the wisdom of the world as their guiding principles. In the text that is the focus of this essay, 1 Cor 1:18–31, Paul sought to *deconstruct* the church’s perception of wisdom (18–25) and then, as an encouragement for the Corinthians to find their common identity in Christ’s gospel, to *reconstruct* it in light of the cross of Christ (26–31).

Since the Corinthian church was steeped in Greco-Roman culture, the members of the church were well-versed in Greek philosophy and had an affinity for rhetorical proficiency and the power of words.⁹ They commonly used debate to determine the value of a proposition—in a society that so heavily emphasized Platonic rationality, wisdom was found through philosophical

⁸ Peter Lampe, “Theological Wisdom and the ‘Word about the Cross’: the Rhetorical Scheme in 1 Corinthians 1-4,” *Interpretation* 44, no. 2 (April 1990): 118.

⁹ This is why Paul says in 2:1–5 that when he came to Corinth, he spoke in weak words—he was countering their reliance on the practice of rhetoric as a sufficient means of understanding the gospel, showing them the power of Christ crucified instead of the power of a good argument.

argumentation,¹⁰ and winning these arguments resulted in increased social status.¹¹ These debates were therefore infused with implications for one's pride and honor, and their pride led the members of the body to take sides among the teachings of the apostles. It was this pride-filled emphasis on the power of words that Paul meant when he talked about the "wisdom of the world," and this was what he overturned when he contrasted it with the wisdom of God, which was foolishness to the world. He demonstrated this contrast by examining two opposing directions of divine action, both rooted in the crucifixion of Christ: God made the world's wisdom into foolishness (20), and God made the foolish things of the world into wisdom (27).

What was this wisdom of God that Paul talked about? It was the message of the cross, which was the power of God. The cross was Rome's way of shaming dissidents as they were put to death,¹² so for Christians to worship a Messiah who had been executed on a cross was humiliating; and they not only worshiped that Messiah, they also followed that Messiah as a model for their own salvation. Paul's gospel message was that Christ's death on the cross was not simply something that Christ *did* for humanity in the past tense, as if the church were passive recipients of it, but that it was a posture into which Christ *called the church to participate*, to give up their lives in a continual and ongoing overpowering of death in the world. This was a nonsensical way of thinking to the world because it claimed that the path to authentic, vivid life was to routinely follow Christ's willing subjection to the way of death, trusting in the power of God for resurrection. As Paul said in 22–23, this idea made no sense to the Jews, who expectantly waited for a conquering, messianic warrior in the line of King David, and it made no

¹⁰ Arthur Herman, *The Cave and the Light: Plato Versus Aristotle, and the Struggle for the Soul of Western Civilization*, Kindle Edition. (Random House, 2013).

¹¹ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3 edition. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

¹² Hays, 803.

sense to the Greeks, who lived in pursuit of intellectual ascendance through philosophy and debate.

To demonstrate his case for this disorienting new perspective, Paul appealed to two Hebrew prophets who spoke on the power of God as the shame of the world.

Two References to Hebrew Prophets

The first reference, made in verse 19, is a quotation of Isaiah that Paul used to deconstruct the Corinthian church's conception of wisdom. The context of the prophecy is critical for understanding Paul's meaning to the church. In the time of this oracle from Isaiah, the land of Judah was under threat from the Assyrian Empire, and their leaders felt they had to turn to their Egyptian neighbors for support, so they tried to create an alliance with that pagan nation instead of relying on God for deliverance. The words of Isaiah were a rebuke of Judah's political solution to the threat:

¹³ The Lord said:
 Because these people draw near with their mouths
 and honor me with their lips,
 while their hearts are far from me,
 and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote;
¹⁴ so I will again do
 amazing things with this people,
 shocking and amazing.
 The wisdom of their wise shall perish,
 and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.

Isaiah condemned Judah for *saying* that they trusted in God while in fact *turning away* from God when faced with peril. According to worldly wisdom, Judah had done the right thing by seeking military help from their neighbors, but Isaiah said that God would turn that wisdom into

destruction. Indeed, Judah was soon all but conquered by the Assyrians and, subsequently, was taken over by the Babylonians and sent into exile.

Paul, by quoting this prophecy, said that God had a history of taking decisions that seemed wise according to human reason and subverting them into acts of destruction. God, according to Paul, had no loyalty to the best arguments of the Corinthians (see also 4:20), because talking about God was not equivalent to actually placing one's trust in God. The power of words meant nothing to God.

The second prophetic reference made by Paul, found in 27–29, is an intertextual allusion to Jer 9:23–24,¹³ and it reconstructed what Paul saw as Godly wisdom.

²³ Thus says the LORD: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; ²⁴ but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD.

Walter Brueggemann developed this text from Jeremiah into a pair of parallel, oppositional statements that he called a “triad of bad bragging,” wherein the wisdom of the wise was contrasted with the delight of YHWH:

Do not let the wise boast of their *wisdom*.
Do not let the mighty boast of their *might*.
Do not let the wealthy boast of their *wealth*.

Brag in *steadfast love*.
Brag in *justice*.
Brag in *righteousness*.¹⁴

Paul adapted this triad in his letter to the Corinthians, challenging the church to an alternate reality of wisdom, a kind of wisdom that is not directly associated with that of the

¹³ Gail R O'Day, “Jeremiah 9:22-23 and 1 Corinthians 1:26-31: A Study in Intertextuality,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109, no. 2 (1990): 259–267.

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, “Bragging about the Right Stuff,” *Journal for Preachers* 26, no. 4 (2003): 27–32.

world, either positively or negatively. He did not say that all of the world's reason was necessarily wrong, nor that the foolish things of the world was necessarily right—a direct reversal of that sort would still rely on the world's definition of wisdom, it would simply apply it backwards. Instead, he proposed a wisdom of God that was reoriented around the power and priorities of God. With such an alternative orientation, they could not form a group identity around their apostolic leadership; rather, they could only boast in Christ, and him crucified. To make this point, Paul expressed the triad like this:

God chose the foolish to shame the *wise*.
 God chose the weak to shame the *strong* (mighty).
 God chose the low and despised to reduce to nothing *the things that are exalted*.

 Christ became *righteousness*.
 Christ became *sanctification*.
 Christ became *redemption*.

By creatively redefining Jeremiah's triads in this way, Paul established that the wisdom of God is found in God's perfect righteousness, just sanctification, and loving redemption, which is to say that it is found in the shame and weakness of Christ's crucifixion. The power of God for the church is not in words or rhetoric, but in the act of participating as one in the cross of Christ.

A Matter of Unity, Faith, and Allegiance

Paul's desire for the Corinthian church was that they abandon their factious divisions, a disunity that manifested itself in their appeal to apostolic primacy, and instead find unity in their shared orientation toward the cross of Christ. He did not argue that they should unite behind one apostle's teaching over another—he did not, for example, tell the Corinthians that they should *all* follow *his* teachings since he was their founder—but told them that they were misguided in the exclusionary idea that they could find their God-given identity in the teachings of any mere

human. God would not be found, he said, in the self-certainty of human argumentation, but in their embrace of their own margins, their brokenness, their questions. As Molly Marshall described, “The theology of the cross, paradoxically, recognizes God precisely where God has chosen to hide, in suffering and in all that the wisdom of the world considers to be weakness and folly.”¹⁵ It was by participating in the unity of that weakness that Paul believed they should find their shared identity as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Yet Paul’s concern for the Corinthians was even deeper than their disunity, for their disunity was a symptom of a more dangerous problem. As illustrated in the Isaiah prophecy, their pursuit of worldly wisdom (manifested as church division) was rooted in a distrust in the sufficiency of God’s wisdom. Paul asked them to leave their debates, recognizing these arguments as foolishness to God, and embrace with humility the faithful work of God in Jesus’ procession to death, trusting that giving themselves up in earnest submission to God was the true path to righteousness. The response of the faithful, he said, was to turn away from argumentation, which was fundamentally based in pride, and toward a radical, Christ-like ethos of emptying oneself out in love, even when the result was to look like a fool.¹⁶

In the end, then, Paul asserted that this was a question of allegiance. Would the Corinthians give their fealty to the apostles they followed (which was, in truth, fealty to their own interpretations of the faith), or would they give themselves wholly to Christ? This was the question of sanctification, and anything other than full-bodied allegiance to Christ was foolishness to God, no matter how wise it seemed in the eyes of the Corinthians.

¹⁵ Molly Truman Marshall, “Forsaking a Theology of Glory: I Corinthians 1:18-31,” *Ex auditu* 7 (1991): 102.

¹⁶ William H Willimon, “Looking like Fools,” *The Christian Century* 99, no. 8 (March 10, 1982): 261–262.

Conclusion

In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul asserted that God's wisdom, the unifying element of all believers, was a complete reorientation of the wisdom of the world. In Jesus' submission to the cross, God had demonstrated the power of God over the certainties of the world and had exalted the things the world considered foolish. As Jesus had taught his disciples, the last were made first in the kingdom of God, and the ways of humanity were not the ways of God. If the Corinthian church would trust in the power of God, they would find themselves bound together as one body.

This same message bears relevance for Christians today. Rather than finding our identity in our doctrinal positions, our apostolic leaders, or any other reflection of the wisdom of the world, we must center ourselves on the wisdom and power of God displayed in the cross.

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